

Book Review

Jim Harries, *How Western Anti-Racism Harms Africa and How We Can Do Better*

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Harries, Jim (2021). *How Western Anti-Racism Harms Africa and How We Can Do Better*. Chichester: Faithbuilders, 206 pp., £12, ISBN: 978-1-9131-8164-2.

Introduction

Dr. Jim Harries has long been a scholar, thinker, and “vulnerable missionary”—living and serving incarnationally in both Zambia and Kenya since 1988. Since 2011 Harries has published numerous books pertaining to the African church and intercultural Christian ministry, communication, development, and secularism. While Harries encourages Christian partnership and mutual learning, he strongly opposes well-meaning foreign generosity that can undermine African ingenuity and promote dependency. In this book, Harries argues that secular, Western “anti-racist” efforts, while appearing to support African independence and identity, instead communicate cultural condescension, paternalism, and dependence on foreign funding and power. Harries confronts contemporary anti-racism writers, exposing both the weaknesses and hypocrisy of their arguments, as secular solutions to peoples who are naturally rich in faith and culture. Harries argues that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can address current African needs and problems, as well as point Africans to lasting peace and prosperity.

Summary

In his introduction, Harries acknowledges that challenging the “anti-racist” narrative can give the mistaken impression that he is racist—yet he is willing to tackle this highly sensitive topic. His purpose is to show that Western secularism undermines development in sub-Saharan Africa by concealing the need for the gospel. He argues that the anti-racist narrative, in attempting to achieve racial impartiality, overlooks historical and cultural differences as well as assumes the universality of the Western secularist view. In promoting colorblindness and political correctness, that view chooses willful ignorance of true cultural and racial diversity, presuming upon secular commonalities which do not exist. As Harries builds his argument, he points his readers to the works of the French scholar René Girard (1923-2015) and other contemporary scholars, who both draw correlations between cultural ways and prosperity and see the gospel as the solution to suffering and poverty.

In Chapter One, Harries describes the modern version of Western domination of indigenous peoples through interventions “for their own good.” Prevalent use of English language captures the hearts and minds of young people, drawing them away from their indigenous culture. Harries argues that liberalism and secularism are neither necessary nor normative. Non-western peoples are not blank slates; their history and culture inform their current life experiences, so different from those of the West. Harries warns of Western secular hegemony which assumes Africans to be fellow (or future) Western secularists. Many of the anti-racism arguments are really about culture, and not race. A healthier view of cultural difference can help us to love others as they are, not as superior or inferior.

In Chapter Two, Harries critiques the Western secularist tendency to use English when communicating with non-Westerners as well as to ignore the biblical origin of the Western worldview. Harries attributes much of the suffering and poverty in Africa to a pervasive trait of envy, and he asserts that a biblical orientation can best address poverty and suffering, as it promotes productivity, independence and self-reliance. Western secularists would likely dismiss this view as racist, however. The use of English correlates to levels of pay and promotion, hence devaluing the local language and culture.

In Chapter Three, Harries correlates African witchcraft and envy. Western romanticism views man as basically good, ignoring the reality of sin and the need for God's grace. Sinful hearts envy and kill, and use innocent people as scapegoats, to bring about peace. This tactic is Satan's deception and is resolved only by Christ's atoning death on the Cross. Harries theorizes that witchcraft allows one to "kill" or protect by mystical means and may provide some relief from the cycle of revenge and violence. Fear of witchcraft may increase prosperity, as those envious of another's prosperity are less likely to steal or kill for gain.

In Chapter Four, Harries recommends a transformational approach to witchcraft, alleviating human suffering through Christ's love and mercy. Because anti-racists tend to dismiss witchcraft as superstition, they would likely criticize this approach as "racist." Yet, by ignoring the cultural "burdens" in others, they only perpetuate them. Harries sees this approach as bigoted selfishness.

In Chapter Five, Harries argues that anti-racism protects secular ideologies from exposure to truths about the human condition. Anti-racist ideology presumes the "assumed norm" and superiority of Western secularism. Harries asserts that the anti-racist despises anyone who does not do things, or see things, as white Westerners do. Such an anti-racist posture is a form of white Western chauvinism. If anti-racism is undermined, then secularism will also lose its power.

In Chapter Six, Harries shows the futility of anti-racist endeavors to unify and equalize diverse peoples through one universal secularist ideology. Western education, once fully grounded in Christian thought, is now secularized. Harries argues for a return to holistic, de-secularized education in the local languages. Western powers are currently embedded within African institutions so as to avoid the appearance of "re-colonizing" and accusations of racism. Western education rewards African people for conforming to Western ideas; this system reinforces foreign dominance and discourages indigenous thought, ingenuity, and development. Harries recommends that the West release its control over Africa by acknowledging the reality of cultural difference and differing outcomes. Westerners should live as learners and participants in the African context, without introducing foreign wealth or control. This "vulnerable mission" can undermine anti-racist ideology and the negative impact of Western secularism.

In Chapter Seven, Harries links people's ways of life to their level of wealth or poverty. Those who adhere to gospel teaching are more likely to generate wealth and maintain well-being. The Western secularist desires equality but denies that cultural differences directly impact prosperity. For this reason, they attempt to alleviate suffering and poverty through generous aid, which both perpetuates dependency and prevents the recipients from addressing the issues at the root of their suffering. In the past, biblical literacy and knowledge transformed Western peoples and increased their prosperity. Though many cultures have access to the Bible, the dominant influence of Western secularism robs them of this same transformation. Only a common faith in Christ, not secularism, can unite humans. Christian biblical teaching can address Africa's problem of envy plus the related

violence and destructiveness. Witchcraft serves as a stopgap, but the gospel of Christ brings transformation, peace, and prosperity.

In Chapter Eight, Harries argues that anti-racism only “papers over” deep divides in human communities, rather than offering a resolution. It reinforces prejudice, promotes victimization, and falsely claims that it is “not being racist.” Harries observes that anti-racism ideology is very similar to its opposite: *white supremacy*. In fact, there is a blurring of the line between racism and anti-racism. Political correctness and fear of being considered racist have caused many Westerners to remain quiet and not question inconsistencies and overt deceptions in international relationships and power dynamics. While many secular projects fail, churches in Africa seem to grow in influence, perhaps due to the centrality of the Bible and its teachings. This difference tells the truth: that God is sovereign and righteous, and that only He can bring peace and prosperity to mankind. Western secularism, by contrast, is devoid of life-giving truths.

In Chapter Nine, Harries compares the Ethiopian Church and African Indigenous churches, whose common trait is that they have never been secularized. This, he claims, confounds and embarrasses anti-racists. Harries defines and illustrates, at great length, the term “racist” and how anti-racists apply it selectively to various religious and secular traits.

In Chapter Ten, Harries suggests that Westerners can best relate to Africa if they throw off secular anti-racism ideology in favor of anti-racism rooted in grace. By embracing the Gospel, we can promote and celebrate cultural difference, while also addressing issues of sin and injustice, for lasting peace and prosperity, through Christ. Harries suggests a four-prong response to anti-racism: *expose what is going on; live vulnerably in relation to the non-Western world; live God’s love and grace, guided by the Spirit, following the Gospel; divest anti-racism of its tendency to ignore culture.*

Conclusion

Dr. Jim Harries lives out his faith in Christ among a people he dearly loves, serving humbly and wholly. His deep respect for African ways and his commitment to the African church community resonate in his writings. This particular work can be easily misunderstood, as it addresses controversial intercultural issues pertaining to race and racism, using contemporary terms which are defined and understood differently by persons with opposing views on the subject. The title may, in itself, be off-putting, but begs for serious engagement. Harries is neither a provocateur nor zealot. However, he speaks boldly and honestly against what he considers an insidious and harmful ideology.